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Abstract

This paper examines current conversations in American Judaism about the inclusion and affirmation of transgender Jews. It focuses on three areas in particular where this dialogue is taking place: within institutional Judaism, amongst transgender scholars of Judaism, and amongst transgender Jews who innovate ritual. The conversation within institutional Jewish spaces often begins with alternative hermeneutics of Jewish texts that frame transgender Jews as centrally present within traditional Judaism. This reframing may be persuasive for some but it lacks a critique of the power structures that have historically, and presently, situated transgender people (as well as queer people, women, etc.) as "others" denied access to various Jewish spaces and practice. In other words, appealing to the text to affirm inclusion risks implicitly reifying the normalization of patriarchy and heterosexism within Judaism. This paper also considers work by transgender scholars of Judaism who examine non-binary rabbinic gender categories, asking what the limits of such categories’ liberatory possibilities are for contemporary transgender Jews. Lastly, this paper considers mikveh rituals for gender transition created and performed by transgender Jews. The authors of these rituals assert a queer/trans theology that frames gender transition as an empowering moment of self-creation where each ritual participant becomes God’s partner in the act of creation. These rituals not only allow participants to mark their gender transitions Jewishly, but also provide an opportunity for transgender Jews to envision and participate in the queer-affirming Judaism they hope to bring into being.